

ARTICLE APPEARED

ON PAGE

A-15

BALTIMORE SUN

22 APRIL 1983

There Is No Replacement for Simple Trust

Washington

COMMANDER WHITEHEAD, the man with the long gray beard, used to tantalize television audiences with the "secret of Schhh . . ." The secret soon got out; he was talking about a brand of soft drink, and the Schweppes company went on to other imagery. But if the Reagan Administration has its way, other graybeards will sit beside the

So far, so good. But as with everything else in government, there have to be limits. The first is on what gets classified in the first place, and anyone who has ever read a document with "confidential," "secret," or "top secret" stamped in bright red letters is cynical about the standards too often applied. Perhaps articles from the daily newspaper aren't actually classified "secret" by the Pentagon, but that is the waggish rumor that has long circulated in the corridors of power.

By Robert E. Hunter

typewriter of every ex-government official who ever saw a secret, with cautionary fingers to lips lest the identity of "Schhh . . ." slip out.

That is the import of a document signed by President Reagan early in March: National Security Decision Directive (NSDD) 84. Well, it's over because of its threat to use the lie-detecting polygraph against any government employee suspected of leaking to the press, the new directive is far more important for what it could do to people who have left federal service. In brief, before any official henceforth becomes qualified to see certain kinds of secrets—defined as "Sensitive Compartmented Information"—he or she will have to sign an agreement including a provision for prepublication review to assure deletion of SCI and other classified information." That means a few thousand senior officials; it means not just the really sensitive stuff but *anything* ever considered secret; it could mean review of *everything* an ex-official chooses to write for publication; and it means forever.

So what's wrong with that? Surely, the United States Government has the right—indeed, the duty—to protect the nation's vital secrets, especially those that got to the heart of intelligence-gathering, which is a major reason for "compartmenting" secrets to limit access to them. Surely, too, anyone who goes into the federal government should do so only with the clear understanding that this entails a public trust, scrupulously to be honored.

There are all kinds of secrets. Some go to the vital heart of American security. But a mass of them involve far less sensitive subjects, such as political judgments about foreign countries and leaders that rapidly become dated. Some are designed to keep today's diplomatic plans from being revealed prematurely, whereas tomorrow they'll properly be on the evening news. And, as human nature would have it, the secret stamp is too often used to shelter political embarrassment, as Watergate proved. Under the new directive, discussing in print any of these so-called secrets would be a no-no, for as long as the government deems fit.

In theory, the memoirs of today's leaders—including Ronald Reagan himself—could be reduced to a few short bromides; and the op-ed pages could be ruled off-limits to ex-officials, not because of secrets expunged, but rather because of the ponderous processes required to read and review articles, however innocuous, that might need to go to press tonight to have any claim on readership. We might hear little or nothing from former officials about El Salvador, arms control negotiations, the debate on the MX missile. At the extreme, one strength of the American system—that, like Cincinnatus, people come and go in government—could be weakened.

Of course, in practice the new rules are not designed to impose such harsh requirements, but rather to stop the tiny handful of willful individuals who violate the confidence vested in them. A determined violator, however, would not be impeded; nor, in practice, would top-level former officials be prevented from drawing on rafts of classified material in penning their footnotes to history—as the Carter Administration memoirs now emerging amply demonstrate. The only people limited would be those too weak and vulnerable to claim special privilege.

We must also hope that this and future administrations will exercise discretion in applying the new rules. Presumably, no one

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